

Lake Tahoe region is next phase of National Geographic geotourism mapping project

By Matt Welch
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LAKE TAHOE — A project to create a geotourism map of the Sierra Nevada area is moving toward Lake Tahoe for its next phase.

Geotourism refers to a segment of tourism based on the land and natural wonders of an area, and National Geographic is currently teaming up with several regional organizations to create a map of all the Sierra Nevada region, a 25-county area in California and Nevada. And the Tahoe area is the next part of that area to be mapped.

“The ultimate goal is to brand the Sierra Nevada as a holistic destination,” said Jim Dion, the associate director of the National Geographic Center for Sustainable Destinations.

The first phase was a Yosemite Gateway mapping, and the corresponding website map launched Thursday, April 8. The next phase will map what National Geographic calls the Tahoe Emigrant Corridor, an area including Washoe and Douglas counties and Carson City in Nevada and El Dorado, Nevada and Placer counties in California, said Nicole DeJonghe, program director for the Sierra Business Council, one of National Geographic's partners on the project.

In each phase, the group is compiling information from locals and visitors about area destinations, recreation opportunities, accommodations, restaurants, museums and other experiences that might be appealing to possible visitors, Dion said. While travel services like Expedia “bundle what's known,” he said geotourism is intended to gather local opinions and find ways for visitors to connect with lesser-known communities and geographic areas in authentic ways. The group hopes that visitors will provide feedback on areas they visit and will use social media sites connected to the geotourism website to strengthen the map, DeJonghe said.

“When people are viewing this, they can see the voices of the Sierra,” DeJonghe said.

For the Tahoe map, DeJonghe said they will solicit nominations during June, July and August for places to be featured, but anyone can submit nominations before or after that period, since the map is an ongoing project. The group will also host some public meetings and perform outreach in order to get nominations of interesting geotourist sites in Tahoe. The predicted launch date for the Tahoe site is November of this year, she said, with most of the compiling happening in the fall.

For all four phases of the Sierra mapping, National Geographic has received 1,215 nominations as of April 6. The target completion date for the four phases of the Sierra mapping is the end of 2011, said Bob Kingman, area manager for the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, another partner on the project.

“It's really a project that represents the region,” Kingman said.

National Geographic has completed 12 similar geotourism maps and has four in the works for 2010-11, Dion said, and the projects are supported by a number of grants. The end goal of the Sierra project is to create a physical map in addition to the website, Dion said.

“To me, it's one of our flagship projects, just because of the site of the Sierra Nevada,” he said.

To see the geotourism map of the Yosemite Gateway or to nominate for the Tahoe Emigrant Corridor mapping, visit www.sierranevadageotourism.org.